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ZNR UUUUU ZZH
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FM AMEMBASSY SEOUL
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 9142
INFO RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 0958
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 1033
RUEHC/DEPT OF LABOR WASHINGTON DC
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RUCPDO/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHDC 1521
RUALSFJ/COMUSJAPAN YOKOTA AB JA
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PASS USTR FOR AUGEROT AND KI

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [SOCI](#) [ECON](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KS](#)
SUBJECT: "YOU'VE COME A LONG WAY BABY:" THE RISING STATUS
OF KOREAN WOMEN

REF: A. 05 SEOUL 1058

[1](#)B. 05 SEOUL 3215
[1](#)C. 05 SEOUL 3368

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (U) Korean women are better educated than ever before and are working in greater numbers outside the home, joining management, becoming professionals, and entering politics. The entry of women into the public arena suggests that the ROK is slowly breaking away from its Confucian male-centered culture. Persistent gender discrimination, such as chauvinistic views on "men's work" and "women's work," however, have offset some of these gains. The ROKG is currently working on policies to address gender inequality and to better balance families and careers. Though deeply entrenched sexist attitudes will not likely disappear easily or completely, women have made many inroads across numerous categories and will likely continue to see their status rise.
END SUMMARY.

MORE WOMEN EDUCATED AND WORKING

[1](#)2. (U) Women in Korea are enjoying historically high levels of education. According to the National Statistical Office (NSO), of the 1.3 million 18- to 21-year-old women, a record 675,000 were enrolled college in 2004 -- almost 51 percent, compared to 15 percent in 1985. Korean women are graduating at the top of their classes in record numbers and passing the tough civil service exams. Last July, the Civil Service Commission reported that women outperformed men for the first time on the foreign service exam. Out of 1,191 applicants, ten of the 19 successful testers were women. The highest score went to a woman. Similar results were seen in the tests for senior civil and judicial officers. Even at secondary levels of education, girls are finding success. A 2005 Ministry of Education report stated that girls outperformed or were on a par with boys on the five basic subjects tested, including math and science, on the National

Academic Achievement Test administered to sixth- ninth- and tenth-graders.

13. (U) In addition, women are increasingly working outside the home. The NSO released new numbers showing that almost 50 percent (49.8 percent), or 9.9 million, women were in the workforce in May. This new record is part of the steady rise of working women since the NSO first began tallying female economic activity in 1963: 41.5 percent in 1973, 47.0 percent in 1990, and 48.8 percent in 2000. The surge of middle-aged women in the work force has driven up the overall numbers of working women. In May, 2.7 million women 50 and older were working, and double income families represented 30 percent of Korean households. Women in politics and management increased nearly 90 percent in the last five years, and women represented 46.3 percent of the nation's total doctors, teachers, lawyers, scientists and journalists in 2005. Women employers in the ROK reached 353,000 at the end of September 2005, up eight percent from the previous year, comprising 20.7 percent of all business owners in the country.

WOMEN AND POLITICAL POWER

14. (U) In addition to educational and economic gains, Korean women have been making their mark in the political arena. Today the National Assembly has 30 female lawmakers, the highest number in ROK history, and more women are taking executive positions in government. The increase of female political power is best seen through three of Korea's most celebrated women politicians: Han Myung-sook, Kang Kum-sill, and Park Geun-hye.

15. (U) Han made history when she became the ROK's first female Prime Minister in April. A noted activist during the ROK democracy movement in the 1970s and 1980s, Han had set previous records by becoming the first female Minister of Gender Equality in 2001 and later Minister of Environment in 2003. Twice elected to the National Assembly (2000, 2004), she is known as the "godmother" of Korea's feminist movement and maintains strong ties to the progressive NGO community.

16. (U) Kang, a former human rights attorney, developed overnight name recognition when she became the first female Justice Minister in 2003. She is respected for her determination to create a truly independent judicial system and to root out corruption during her 17-month tenure as Minister. She won the hearts of the Korean public through her logical, outspoken remarks and for her reform image. The ruling Uri Party tapped Kang to run for Seoul mayor in the May 31 local elections and dubbed her the "Joan of Arc" of the Uri, as party officials pinned their hopes on Kang to help raise the party's dwindling popularity. Though she lost the race, rival Grand National Party (GNP) viewed her entry as a serious threat because of her immense public appeal.

17. (U) The most well known female politician in Korea is Sisa Monthly's "Woman of the Year" and the Monthly JoongAng's "Most Influential Woman in Korea," Park Geun-hye. Park was elected the GNP's Chairwoman in 2004 and is credited with having reversed the GNP's downward spiral in the weeks before the April 2004 general elections. She surprised skeptics with her leadership and charisma and ensured the party's emergence as a viable opposition, securing 121 of the 299 National Assembly seats. She first joined the GNP in 1995 and won a seat in the 15th National Assembly in the 1998 by-election. She was re-elected by a wide margin in 2000 and 2004. She stepped down as Chairwoman of the party in June, which many believe signals her ambitions for the party's nomination for the 2007 Presidential Elections. The former GNP Chairwoman is a strong contender and, because of her enormous popularity, stands a real possibility of becoming Korea's first female president.

PARADIGM SHIFTS AMONG WOMEN

18. (U) The psychological changes Korean women have undergone

are most evident in Korea's young women whose outlook on life is markedly different from their predecessors. Donduk University's 2005 nationwide survey on childbirth, revealed that 24.4 percent of women in their 20s and 30s viewed raising children as optional. The percentage was higher among double-income couples, highly educated people, and high-income earners. Other polls show as many as 50 percent of women preferred to stay single, compared to 35 percent of men. Marrying shortly after high school or going to college to meet a spouse, as previous generations had done, is increasingly considered anachronistic. Korea's young women foresee a career after graduation, then marriage, followed by children if time and money allow.

¶9. (U) These changes in attitude have resulted in high employment among women in their twenties. The end of 2005 saw almost 2.2 million young women employed, outpacing their male counterparts (1.9 million). In the first quarter of 2006, young women continued to outpace men, 2.3 million compared to 2.1 million. Recruiting companies such as Job Korea have found that young women are more aggressive than men in their studies and job search. They are better in languages and in job interviews, which has benefited them as the interview is steadily becoming more important than grades. Women are also more willing to adapt to today's tight job market -- more willing to relocate, work for smaller companies, and, if necessary, lower their own expectations.

KOREA BEHIND WORLD STANDARDS IN GENDER EQUALITY

¶10. (U) Although Korean women are enjoying new levels of education, income, and influence, gender equality in Korea continues to fall short by international standards. In 2005, the World Economic Forum (WEF) published "Women's Empowerment: Measuring the Global Gender Gap," which assessed the gender gap by measuring the extent to which women in 58 countries -- all 30 OECD countries and 28 emerging markets -- have achieved equality with men in five critical areas: economic participation, economic opportunity, political empowerment, educational attainment, and health and well-being. Sweden took top honors; the ROK was ranked 54. Only four countries -- Jordan (55), Saudi Arabia (56), Pakistan (57), and Egypt (58) -- fared worse in gender equality. By comparison, the U.S. was 17, China 33, and Japan 38.

¶11. (U) In the WEF rankings, the ROK came in 55th out of 58 in "economic opportunity," which spotlights the institutional discrimination Korean women face. A 2005 Korea Labor Institute (KLI) research found that women in their 50s are most discriminated against in the job market. Personnel managers and CEOs from 1,000 ROK companies revealed that between two equally competent applicants, older, married women only had a 33.7 percent chance of getting hired. Married women in general stood a 36.9 percent chance, and women overall had a 37.1 percent chance. Companies view women as investment "losses" because some 60 percent of Korean women end up leaving the workforce after giving birth due to poor childcare support, thus putting women at a hiring disadvantage. Prospective employers frequently ask single women when they plan to marry and if they will continue to work after marriage.

¶12. (U) Attitudes on "men's work" and "women's work" persist, as demonstrated by the division of household duties. A 2005 NSO report found Korean women spend on average 237 minutes on housework per day. Korean men spend 32 minutes. By comparison, American women and men spent 192 and 110 minutes, respectively, on housework.

¶13. (U) Chang Jiyeun of the Korea Labor Institute (KLI) explained to poloff that Korean women had made significant gains over the years. However, that did not mean women had attained parity with men. Men's economic participation rate was 75 percent, compared to 50 percent for women. Moreover, many women, especially older women, entered the job market to

offset rising living costs or to supplement their husbands' low retirement income, not to pursue careers. As a result, they were concentrated in low-skilled and low-wage jobs, creating an income gap between men and women. Double-income families in Korea earn only KRW 720,000 (USD 757) a month more on average than single-income families. Chang further pointed out that while the National Assembly had more women representatives than ever before, the 30 women only make up 13 percent of the 299 parliamentarians, short the world average of 15.7 percent of female lawmakers. In some countries, such as Mozambique and Argentina, women comprise 30 percent of parliament. Even in the education arena, Chang noted that 80 percent of Korean men go to college compared to 51 percent of Korean women.

OLD HABITS ARE HARD TO BREAK: VIOLENCE AND CHAUVINISM

¶14. (U) Meanwhile, domestic violence continues to plague Korean society, although official statistics and anecdotal evidence suggest a decline in frequency. According to a 2005 report released by the Ministry of Gender Equality, one in six married women has suffered domestic violence. The survey, conducted by Gallup Korea, showed that 21.7 percent of husbands with a male authoritarian view of marriage used physical violence against their wives, more than double that of husbands who said they viewed their wives as equals (9.9 percent). Forty-two percent of the 6,156 respondents (3,701 men, 3,085 women) have suffered mental and verbal abuse and another seven percent sexual assault. Almost half (44.3 percent) of the respondents said reporting to the police would not be helpful.

¶15. (U) Traditionally, Koreans have considered domestic violence a private matter. Old Korean proverbs, such as "samjongjido," which instructs a woman to obey her father until marriage, husband until his death, and sons until her own death, have kept women largely silent on the issue. Other folkloric expressions such as "women and dried pollack should be beaten every three days," reflect a deep-rooted psychological acceptance of male dominance of women through violence in Korean culture. Though gender equality is promoted today, many in the older generation, both men and women, hold onto such "traditions." This existential worldview is one reason the hojuje -- Korea's family registry system that only recognized men as legal heads of households -- took 50 years to abolish (REF A).

¶16. (U) Other sexist views toward women persist, as highlighted by the case of a senior Korean politician, Rep. Choi Yeon-hee. Choi, a three-term legislator is accused of sexual harassment for fondling a female reporter's breasts in February during a drinking session. Choi initially excused himself by saying that he thought he had grabbed the restaurant owner; later he apologized and claimed to be drunk. Other male legislatures came to Choi's defense explaining that Choi is a "well-mannered" man. Even opposition lawmakers like Rep. Hahn Kwang-won (Uri) explained on his web site that it was "natural that everyone who sees a beautiful flower is tempted to enjoy its smell and touch it."

¶17. (U) Outraged women legislators led the fight to censure Choi and demanded that he leave the Assembly. The measure passed 149 to 84 in April. However, Choi refused to step down, stating he would let the courts determine his fate. The reporter filed a lawsuit against the legislator, and the case went to court June 15 where Choi blamed alcohol for his behavior. Public opinion against Choi remains negative. His next court appearance is scheduled for July. Although some skeptics believe that Rep. Choi will "get away" with his sexual assault, the National Assembly's censure of Choi indicates the increasing level of influence women now hold in Korean politics and society and, more importantly, spotlights the changing attitudes toward gender relations and workplace behavior.

LOW BIRTH RATE: A BLESSING IN DISGUISE FOR WOMEN

¶18. (U) The ROK has one of the world's lowest total fertility rates (TFR). According to a preliminary 2005 NSO report, the 2004 record low of 1.16 children per childbearing woman (age 15 to 49) dropped to a new low of 1.08. One of the reasons women have consistently said they preferred not to have children was because of the discrimination they face in the job market if they wish to maintain both a career and family (REF B, C). As a result of the low birth rate, the ROK's core labor force of 25- to 49-year-olds is expected to decrease by 200,000 every year starting in 2008. Ironically, the growing need for labor could impel greater gender equality in the employment market as the nation will have to turn to women to supplement the shortage of workers, according to Chang of KLI.

¶19. (U) For example, Assistant Director Kim Soon-rim of the Ministry of Labor's Equal Employment Bureau explained how the Affirmative Employment Improvement Measure incentivizes public corporations and large private companies to improve their hiring practices and maintain a certain ratio of women in management. Companies with strong records of female employment would receive benefits such as tax breaks and financial support for its human resource departments. Women-friendly companies would also have an advantage when bidding for government contracts. Plans are also underway to double the number of state-run childcare centers to 2,700 by 2010, so that women are less compelled to choose between children or careers. Additionally, state-run unemployment insurance will cover 90 days of maternity leave for small and medium companies that only provide 30 days to further support women in the workplace.

CONCLUSION: KOREA ON THE (SLOW) PATH TOWARD GENDER EQUALITY

¶20. (U) Older women, with more economic power, are less tolerant of unhappy marriages, leading to an increase in "twilight" divorces -- marriages that end after 20 or more years. Most Koreans support female employment and more Koreans place greater emphasis on quality family time over long hours at the office and late night drinking sessions with the boss and co-workers. These changes bode well for gender equality. Although deeply embedded sexist "norms" in Korean culture are not likely to disappear quickly, easily, or completely, Korean women appear poised to continue to make gains toward social, economic, and political equality with their male counterparts.

VERSHBOW